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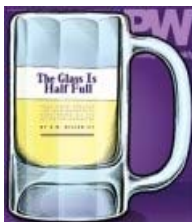
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Big Bad Tad

Grunge's true hero is exposed in a new documentary.

by [Michael Alan Goldberg](#)



A cut above: In another world, Tad might've taken Nirvana's mantle in Seattle's grunge history. Photo by Charles Peterson

Tad came before Nirvana.

It was 1991, an unconscionably hot August night, and the Seattle quartet—led by their namesake, the hulking and hairy singer/guitarist Tad Doyle—took over the stage of City Gardens in Trenton, N.J., like deranged mountain men hell-bent on permanently robbing the waiting audience of its hearing before headliners Primus turned up.

Under Tad's brilliantly deafening sludge, sweat dripped from the walls and pooled on the floor as bodies flung into one another. Brief respites came between songs as Doyle howled hilariously about Satan and smoking pot, and then it was right back to the weighty, pummeling punk-metal assault.

At the end of it all Doyle hopped off the stage and the crowd quickly parted to let him through. I remember saying, "That was fucking awesome!" as he passed by. He threw up devil horns, screamed something like "Raahh!" in my face, grabbed me in a bear-hug, and lifted me off the ground for a couple seconds.

It was the coolest moment ever.

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And then a month or so later Nirvana played City Gardens. They were incredibly underwhelming, and couldn't hold a candle to Tad's power and musicality. At that point I was certain Tad would be the undisputed standard-bearer of Seattle's nationally burgeoning grunge phenomenon, and Nirvana would be little more than a historical footnote.

I had it a bit backward.

Or as Seattle rock journalist Charles R. Cross puts it in the new documentary *Tad: Busted Circuits and Ringing Ears*: "Tad's story, unfortunately and sadly, is always gonna be a story of what could have been as opposed to what was."



So what went wrong? As the 90-minute film—which combines live and behind-the-scenes footage shot mostly by Doyle over the band's decade-long lifespan, plus a slew of interviews—unfolds, we learn it was through a series of career-killing incidents: Tad's "Wood Goblins" video being rejected by MTV because the band was "too ugly"; petty lawsuits over album artwork that derailed 1991's *8-Way Santa* (which had been hoped by the band and their label Sub Pop to be the big breakthrough album); a tour poster depicting Bill Clinton smoking a joint that got Tad dropped by a major label; and plenty of intraband squabbling exacerbated by heavy substance abuse. All of this ultimately tore the outfit apart.

But a lot went right too, and the film—hardly a downer and very often hilarious—celebrates all the terrific music, spotlights the triumphs and lighter moments, and shows why Tad remain one of the most beloved bands of that era.

Speaking from his Seattle home, Doyle says it's somewhat strange watching all he lived through rendered in documentary form. "It does bring up a lot of the feelings and emotions of the time," he admits.

Also weird, he notes, is watching all the testimonials delivered by members of Soundgarden, Nirvana, Mudhoney, producer Jack Endino, Sub Pop co-founders Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt and many others.

"Believe it or not, I've never been one who really likes to attract attention to myself, but it happens sometimes," Doyle chuckles. "All of these people are talking about the band more often than not, but there are a few times when it gets personal. I guess if you do something noteworthy, eventually people start talking about it. Either you get used to it, or you get real uncomfortable.

"I don't know if I could have dealt with the kind of attention a lot more publicity or fame would've brought. I'd probably be dead by now, who knows? I had my things I was doing at the time, and given enough rope, I could've hung myself."

Tad the man is still around even if Tad the band isn't. Doyle's now busy with a brand-new rock band Brothers of the Sonic Cloth, and insists there'll be no Tad reunion to go along with the documentary.

Nor are there any regrets.

"If you're looking at the Beatles and Nirvana compared to us, you might go, 'Yeah, what could have been ... ,' but when you look at it in the scope of what it is, I'm very happy with the way everything turned out," he says. "Sure, there were some setbacks that were kind of a bummer at the time. Everybody takes hits on the chin. But I'd say our 15 minutes of fame lasted quite a while."

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